

## ***The Task of Applied Linguistics.***

The activity of describing languages can be called a primary application of linguistics- linguistic theory is applied to the raw data in a corpus of utterances and yields a linguistic description of those data; however, the linguist can only make arbitrary decisions about what to include in, or exclude from his data. Therefore, even at this simple order of application, other linguistic criteria than purely structural ones are involved. Furthermore, a knowledge of the nature of the learner's *mother tongue* is relevant in planning a language teaching operation: this linguistic theory must be applied to the data of that language as well. Overall, the task of applied linguistics in the context of foreign language teaching and learning can be arbitrarily delimited within the following three main areas of interest.

### **1. How does Applied Linguistics relate to Language Learning?**

The process of learning a language is quite different from the process of analysing one. Foreign languages have been successfully mastered throughout the ages without benefit of analysis. It is the production of methods of analysis that is the business of the linguist; but if the linguist claims that such and such method is the best way to learn the language, he is speaking outside his competence. For it is not learning, but language that is the object of linguistics. Therefore, the units used for analysing a language are not necessarily those needed for learning it. Obviously, it becomes important to look for some kind of a field of application, which will enable the teacher to put into practice the works put forward in the most efficient way.

### **2. How can the linguist help people in Language Learning?**

#### ***A. The Structuralist-Behaviourist Approach.***

Until the 1930's, language teaching used traditional grammatical methods. Most of the studies were diachronic; particularly, the grammar descriptions were prescriptive rather than descriptive. The teaching of languages was based on an analysis to look for individual words (morphological approach).

The second language was considered not as a communicative means, but as an analytical approach, to study rules in the first language and the second language in order to find out how they correspond. However, learning rules proves to be a slow way of learning languages, because this process does not necessarily enable the learner to communicate. It can be a simple academic knowledge of the second language, and not the learning of a means of communication.

At the end of the century, phoneticians, particularly those who wanted to see differences between speeches, brought changes; in fact, phoneticians looked at language primarily as speech rather than as writing. Therefore, the new linguists tended to make linguistics look at language as a phenomenon of syntactic structures not individual words. This led to the foundation of the *Structuralism School*. One of their essential hypotheses, as far as second language learning is concerned, is the concept of the *substitution table*. It consists of learning a structure, and eventually, by habits adding (increasing) words to acquire *metrics* (by habits).

This concept, however differs from 'pure' Behaviourism: the behaviour of animals is acquired as a *stimulus-reward* operation. **B F. Skinner** claimed that language is a **verbal behaviour** (verbal habits), a kind of reflex. The outcome of these ideas is that the teacher has to teach those habits without a focus on meaning, at all!

A major criticism of the behaviourist theory on language learning that one can put forward is simply the fact that the theory does not show how we learn language: it only consists of a superficial description. Moreover, Chomsky, for instance, infers that Skinner has taught animals to do things not to speak language.

### ***B. The Mentalist-Semantic Approach.***

The Language Acquisition Device, as suggested by Chomsky, is rather a mental phenomenon, which is generally imparted only to human beings. Human languages have common properties that make them different from animal means of communication. Human language is mainly a mental activity. Language is not a question of habit formation, but rather building hypotheses on language where creativity plays a major role. Many modern research works based on meaning and founded on the principles of the mentalist school were undertaken during the 1960's-70's. The works that follow are by, no means, the most important, nevertheless, they have been chosen as only representatives of this linguistic current.

**a. Courtney B. Cazden.**

This type of studies started as **Transformationalists** emphasized the importance of meaning in first language acquisition. One of the first linguist who presented studies within this context was **Cazden**. She constituted groups of children matched to age, sex, background, and applied two main techniques in studying first language acquisition on these grounds: **modeling** and **expansion**. Cazden's second technique was more successful, because she did not correct the children directly. Therefore, the child does his/her best especially when he/she cannot cope with high grammatical structures. There is no need to correct the child, but produce more and richer linguistic environment.

**b. Jean Piaget.**

Piaget also tried to study how human beings represent things in their minds. He believed that a child is born with a brain that is not fully developed. Consequently, at an early stage (first stage), things are represented in a physical way: movement, action, feeling (physical, like touching or tasting). Then, around eighteen (18) months, the child moves from **actional scheme** to **represential scheme** (second stage) which comes with maturation.

The child needs language in order to represent things present in its mind, or to abstract things present in the environment.

**c. M.A.K Halliday.**

Halliday's studies are more practical; he tries to analyse all aspects of language, especially a better understanding of semantics. He regarded language (of an adult) as having three levels:

- *content* (meaning),
- *form* (grammar and lexis),
- *expression* (sounds).

The child uses combinations of sounds to express meanings, but these combinations are not adults' utterances. The child starts by imitating its natural sounds, then, it gradually acquires sounds that correspond to adult utterances. A Child's meanings have six main functions:



1. **Instrumental**: concentrating on/and getting something.
2. **Regulatory**: asking somebody to get something.
3. **Interactional**: representing relations with others.
4. **Personal**: expressing pleasure: we should note that all these functions take place at the period of ten months but language has not yet any form.
5. **Imaginative**: playing and making meaningless sounds (around 12 months).
6. **Heuristic**: recognising other things (backwards and forwards) which are not exactly part of the child (18 months). The development of human language requires two main stages: during the first one, very rapidly the child develops a kind of form (structure) of one's language. In the second, it is the development of dialogue (or discourse). The child recognises that language is a need for communication or for a communicative role (before this stage it does not need grammar).
7. **Informative**: this function is purely related to language, because grammar is a device for combining meanings; in other words, it is to express several meanings simultaneously. Up to 18 months, the child is not really learning a special language (he/she might use words but it is only incidental), then at 24 months he/she applies the lexis of a given language. It is at this later stage that one can say the child starts to develop communicative competence.

### 3. What is the Use of Applied Linguistics to the Teacher?

- a. Although the ability to analyse a language may not be the most important qualification of a language teacher, some training in practical linguistics can enable him to see the similarities and differences in the languages he is dealing with.
- b. Applied linguistics can also help the teacher understand, evaluate, and perhaps use some of the descriptions of the language he is teaching.
- c. If the training is neither too one-sided nor dogmatic, it may prevent him from becoming the prisoner of a single school of thought.
- d. Ideally, such training could put the teacher in a position to analyse each linguistic contribution and its application to language teaching, from the smallest details of analysis to the hidden theoretical assumptions, on which the analysis is based. Such training would make it unnecessary for the language teacher to swallow a man's philosophy along with linguistics.

